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LITERATURE SPARKS COMPOSITION.

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LITERATURE, BEING READILY AVAILABLE AS PART OF THE CURRICULUM, IS A VALUABLE TOOL FOR INSTRUCTING STUDENTS IN COMPOSITION. THE USE OF LITERATURE CAN STIMULATE DISCUSSIONS AND EFFECTIVE WRITING AMONG STUDENTS OF VARIOUS GRADE AND ABILITY LEVELS. INTEREST IS GENERATED BY KEEPING THE CLASSWORK RELEVANT TO THE LIVES OF THE STUDENTS, AND THINKING IS MOTIVATED BY FREQUENTLY ASKING THEM PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS. FOR EXAMPLE, STUDENTS CAN EXAMINE THE PROPOSITION, "IF YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH TO FIGHT, YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH TO VOTE," IN RELATION TO THE CHARACTERIZATION IN "THE SEAFARER." THEY CAN CONSIDER WHICH THREE OF BEOWULF'S CHARACTERISTICS ARE MOST IMPORTANT FOR A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE TO POSSESS, AND THEY CAN COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE DEVICES USED TO DELINEATE GUILT IN "HAMLET" AND "MACBETH." THE EMPHASIS IN POSING SUCH DISCUSSION AND COMPOSITION TOPICS IS NOT WHAT STUDENTS BELIEVE THE AUTHOR SAYS, BUT RATHER WHAT THEY THINK ABOUT WHAT THE AUTHOR SAYS. GRAMMAR RULES AND LINGUISTICS ARE REPLACED BY A RULE OF THUMB--USE THE EXPRESSION WHICH COMMUNICATES THE DESIRED IMPRESSION. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THIS "LITERARY" APPROACH IS VERIFIED BY HONORS STUDENTS WHO PASS ADVANCED PLACEMENT TESTS, BY COLLEGE PREPARATORY STUDENTS WHO DO WELL AT HIGHLY COMPETITIVE UNIVERSITIES, AND BY GENERAL ENGLISH STUDENTS WHOSE ATTITUDES TOWARD WRITING, LITERATURE, AND THEMSELVES HAVE CHANGED IN A POSITIVE DIRECTION. (THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE 1967 NCTE ANNUAL CONVENTION.) (RD)

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Literature Sparks Composition

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PURPOSE AND SOURCE OF HIGH
SCHOOL WRITING PROGRAM B.7

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Literature Sparks Composition

I was a college drop-out! After a hiatus of thirty years, when I returned to my studies I was amazed to find that English--to the young of the United States--had become a foreign language. At the university from which I was graduated I met many intelligent young men and women who could not, for all practical purposes, communicate in written English prose. I remember the horror in their eyes when I told them that I had signed up to major, not in literature, but in composition. They gasped. "Didn't you know that then you'd have to write?" I had assumed that composition might entail some writing. I was astonished. "I'm not afraid to write," I said. "English is my native tongue. What's the matter with you?"

There were students, even in my final classes, some soon to be English teachers themselves, who could not write well. They could, with ease, use terms like ceasura, synecdoche, metonomy. They knew the rules of grammar. They knew linguistics--structural and generative. They were fully prepared to teach the naming of the parts: climax, denouement, alliteration, assonance--and let's not forget allusion.

I wonder how truly helpful all this knowledge would be in coping with twelfth grade students who write sentences like these:

> Even though many people fear scientific research, however, it seems that it will help man in improving his environment, preparing man for the future, and abling him to cope with his fellow germs.
>
> In reading Of Human Bondage one can see that W. Somerset Maugham had early feelings that existentialism was the best way of life; but that he gave it up after experimenting to settle for life in society.
>
> Philip felt alone with his foot, maybe, because he had never met anyone else with a club foot as his.

All through the novel, Somerset Maugham gives Philip the feeling and state of mind through many incidents which take place during his life.

All of which Maugham tells of their bad side.

Philip's club foot has caused him loneliness in three phases.

Or that they could explain to him that people who criticize someone because of their handicap does not have much respect for other people.

Interwoven among the stanzas of the poem are the relentless advocations of living deaths, clearly illustrated by "trailing garments."

Man's society is dependent on insignificant events which are neglible in comparison of time and the universe, as a while, before and after they occur.

Death, as a mental torment, is a way of escape for the emotions of and an excuse for retardedness.

I shall never forget my feelings when I, a very new teacher, having asked the students to write examples of alliteration, was handed the following sentence by some assonance: "I sent my pants to the tailor for some alliteration."

I believe that two of the most valuable skills which anyone can acquire are mastery of persuasive speech and of expository writing. Most students, I find, have not been properly trained in either. They have not been taught how to communicate.

In my classes I do not teach rules of grammar as such. A possessive is used with a gerund--or, if you prefer, a verbal--because that's the way educated people speak English when it suits their purposes to do so. And I don't teach linguistics, either. When students ask me if this or that is correct, I tell them that the English language is a great, big, wonderful language. They can use anything that they can get away with, anything which creates and communicates the impression which they want to make. I say to them,

"If you want to make people think you are educated, use the proper language to create that impression. If you want people to think you are an ignorant lout be sure to use the proper language to create that impression. Always be sure to use the proper expression to create the proper impression."

I'm always disturbed and filled with professional guilt when a student who does not communicate clearly in writing often does respond quite adequately when I say, "Tell me in your own words what you are trying to say." Perhaps his difficulty stems from trying to write in the teacher's words or with the words he thinks the teacher wants him to write. In my classes I try to "unclutch" the student. I try to free him from whatever it was or whoever it was, who robbed him of his ability to write his native tongue at least as well, if not as easily, as he can speak that tongue. I'm not trying to make a scholar of any student. I'm trying to give him a valuable tool. I use literature because, being part of the curriculum, it is at hand and because it is a very great aid.

The first work in our college preparatory text, Adventures In English Literature is the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Seafarer." I'm very happy about that. Phyllis McGinley did very well writing of her woes because "Sumer is Icumen In" but it wouldn't have suited my purposes nearly as well as "The Seafarer."

I ask, "Anyone like to read this poem for us?"

There is a great silence. So I read it.

I say, "Do you think that the two opposing attitudes shown in the poem are still valid? Do you think that young people now, you, for instance, are interested only

in adventure while the older people are alone in thinking of home and security?"

The silence is of the grave--Marvell's not Wilder's. They are as interested in "The Seafarer" as I was in learning linguistic symbols. Next I say, "There being no "nays" and silence being consent, then I take it that you agree with the characterization. Good. Here is your written assignment: Assuming the characterization found in "The Seafarer" to be valid, discuss the argument, "If you're old enough to fight, you're old enough to vote." Now they want to talk, but now they must write. They grumble. They have to admit that the qualifications for fighting and voting are not the same and, supporting from the text, they must admit that the youth, although he might be very interested in going to VietNam for the sake of adventure, had interests far too limited to qualify him as a really good voter. From now on they usually do offer opinions and from now on they will hear my "Why, why, why?" The rule is, "Say what you want but support what you say." The next assignment is to discuss in writing the following question: Is the average high school graduate today better qualified as a voter than the Anglo-Saxon youth of "The Seafarer"? I tell them to write an affirmative statement hauling at least three "becauses" behind it. Later, after they have learned to write a supportive thesis sentence, they try various ways to write more interesting and less pedestrian introductions. At this time, however, the idea is to have a point of view and to stick to it.

The next assignment, based on the excerpt from Beowulf found in the text, is: If you were voting for a President, which three of Beowulf's characteristics would you feel were most important for the candidate to possess?" The student is advised that it is

wise to show that due regard has been given to all while emphasis is placed only on those three which the student wishes to amplify. This is a good time to discuss various types of transitions. One thing is certain. The student who makes no mention of Beowulf's exquisite tact with poor Hrothgar will get no "good" written across the top of his paper.

How better to learn to be concrete than from Geoffrey Chaucer? This assignment is one that has proven to be a favorite. I found it some place and I'd give credit if I could remember where it was. It is called A' La Chaucer. The members of the class are asked to write a rhymed description of another class member which is concrete enough to be recognizable. The students discover how very vague are "light brown hair," "nice smile," and "always helpful." The idea of tone becomes more meaningful as, being essentially nice people, they wrestle with words in order to be teasing rather than sarcastic. And do I ever take a beating? They don't like my "Thesis sentences with three separate and distinct divisions and other assorted new provisions." One student wrote, "Her pet peeve is the misuse of prepositions; in, of, and for, interchanged, agitate her disposition."

Incidentally, the male reaction to Ashley Montague's essay, "The Natural Superiority of Women" is amusing. That agitates their dispositions. The males try to refute his ideas and the distaff side just sneers.

Once I was foolish enough to have a whole class use Macbeth as the basis for term papers. I had a complete catharsis of that idea after reading at least fifteen rather poorly digested or half digested comparisons with hunks of Aristotle's Poetics. No

doubt it was their mental indigestion which caused such nonsense as these!

> It is a fantasy of the mind only to be enjoyed by the dreamers and the extravagant irrationals who have no concept or idea of true greatness or dignity. It is this flaunt (sic) and complete misconception of life and it's (sic) ideals that I will try to examine through the perfidious personage of Lady Macbeth.
>
> She even attests to him, his love for her in persuasion.
>
> Her copious dreams of per-eminence and stature had an inspiring uplift through the successes and accomplishments of Macbeth, her husband, who had won these aspirants by the most honorable intentions of that day.

In spite of those horrible examples of writing, there are nevertheless, some interesting psychological truths which do interest the students and about which they write very well. For instance, one concerns the cause of Lady Macbeth's mental breakdown and suicide. Macbeth is helpful, also, in another writing exercise. After the class has achieved some degree of familiarity with both Macbeth and Stevenson's great short story, "Markheim," I ask the students to compare and contrast the devices used by the two authors to delineate guilt. This seems to be one of the most difficult of the short assignments. The students do so want to tell the plot. After much trying, however, they do learn. They finally do discuss the devices such as hallucinations, noises, the supernatural and others which reveal the genius of these two great writers. This comparison and contrasting is especially useful in the teaching of proper use of transitions.

The assignment about the devices, is among the very few in which the student's views, as such, are not the main interest. Most

of the work, even the term papers which are based on novels, is concerned largely with the student's thoughts about the work, its theme, its characters, its relevancy to our lives. Sometimes even a writer like Camus or Kafka gets his work torn apart as an artistic failure.

Modern works offer good take-off points. For instance the short stories, "Poison" by Roald Dahl and "The Train from Rhodesia," by Nadine Gordimer, resulted in some very interesting papers about prejudice. The poems, "Nightmare Number Three" by Stephen Vincent Benet, and "The Express" by Stephen Spender, with their opposing points of view about machinery, have resulted in interesting oral and written debates. When I challenged one of my booted, side-burned young students to do as well by his motorcycle as Spender did about the train, he didn't do so badly at that. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" points the way to a paper on "Uniformity, Conformity, Unamimity--Who's Rebelling?"

Along with short stories and poems, essays are a well-spring of ideas. As usual, I don't ask, "What does the author say?" but rather, "What do you think about what he says?," or "What are your own ideas about the same subject?" Some of these essays correlate very well with history classes. George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" for instance presents a political view and also makes some astute comments about the actions of the individual as well as of the mob. After reading Orwell is a good time to ask the student to write a different kind of an assignment, a description of some experience, perhaps one in which he, too, afraid to destroy his image, acted against his own instincts. Another essay, Swift's

"A Modest Proposal," after the initial shock, does offer to the budding economist some very real economic proposals which may be discussed and evaluated.

Still another essay which is challenging and even upsetting to some young writers, is E. M. Forster's, "What I Believe." In it Forster writes, "I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." You just wouldn't believe the furor that statement raises in some breasts. While they still are thinking about this concept of loyalty, I ask them to read Plato's "Crito" wherein Socrates discusses his idea of the citizen. When they have finished reading both Forster and Plato, they read Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience." Then, involved as they are, especially at their age, in the pros and cons of VietNam, surrounded as they are by civil disorders and civil unrest, I ask them to discuss in writing their own idea of what constitutes good citizenship.

Most of the examples which I have been discussing have been used for the college preparatory classes. On different levels and using different materials, we have enjoyed similar discussions and have done appropriate writing in the general English classes and in our honors class. I think this type of program works well at all levels. I try to keep the work interesting by keeping it relevant to their own lives. I try to make the work challenging by asking, "What do you think--and why?"

My approach to the problem of English and the English classes seems to be effective. My honors students are able to pass the advanced placement tests. My college preparatory students do

well at highly competitive universities. And, finally, quite a few of my general English students--and this makes my chest thump and my lips repeat "and behold, it was very good,"--quite like the Prodigal Son, change their attitudes. Just recently one, a sharp, intelligent one, was going to settle for the army and working at a service station just so he could be around cars. He wound up at a junior college where, instead of pushing gas, he will get a chance to try for designing transmissions.

Within the composition teacher there is always the need to dream the impossible dream, to believe that the student who writes as did one of mine, "The prejudism of the people of the South of the negro," can be the one who eventually will write as did another, "Unfortunately, this world of ours is inhabited by Yanquis, Dagoes, Chinks, Dumb Swedes, Dirty Irish, Ivans, Nips, Krauts, Niggers, White Trash, and other assorted inferior peoples. You laugh? Two and a half billion people can't be wrong." The composition teacher searches as for the Holy Grail for something which will change, "He was to lived with his aunt.", into "When he grew older it was no different. He was able to live with a clubfoot but it left is mark on his life, Phillip was still something of an outcast. He was unable to be as sociable as he might have been--because of his clubfoot. Because of his clubfoot, his relationship with people was different than it might have been. Would Mildred have loved him if Phillip hadn't had a clubfoot, and its reflexion on his personality? When Phillip was very poor and was looking for work, he must have thought many times, 'How many of these jobs might I have gotten, but for my foot?' Phillip may have blamed a lot of other things, too, on his foot. 'I could have done this or

that, so and so might have liked me--except for my foot, except for my foot, except for my foot.'"

Sometimes the dream comes true and the search is rewarded. It happens when the one-time illiterate hands the composition teacher a paper which contains these words of warning:

> My mother is good and she is sweet.
> She taught me to be clean and neat.
> Mom used to tuck me in the sack.
> But Mother---please? get off my back?